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Author(s): George C. Edwards III
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Why Not

The Loyalty-Competence Trade-off in Presidential Appointments

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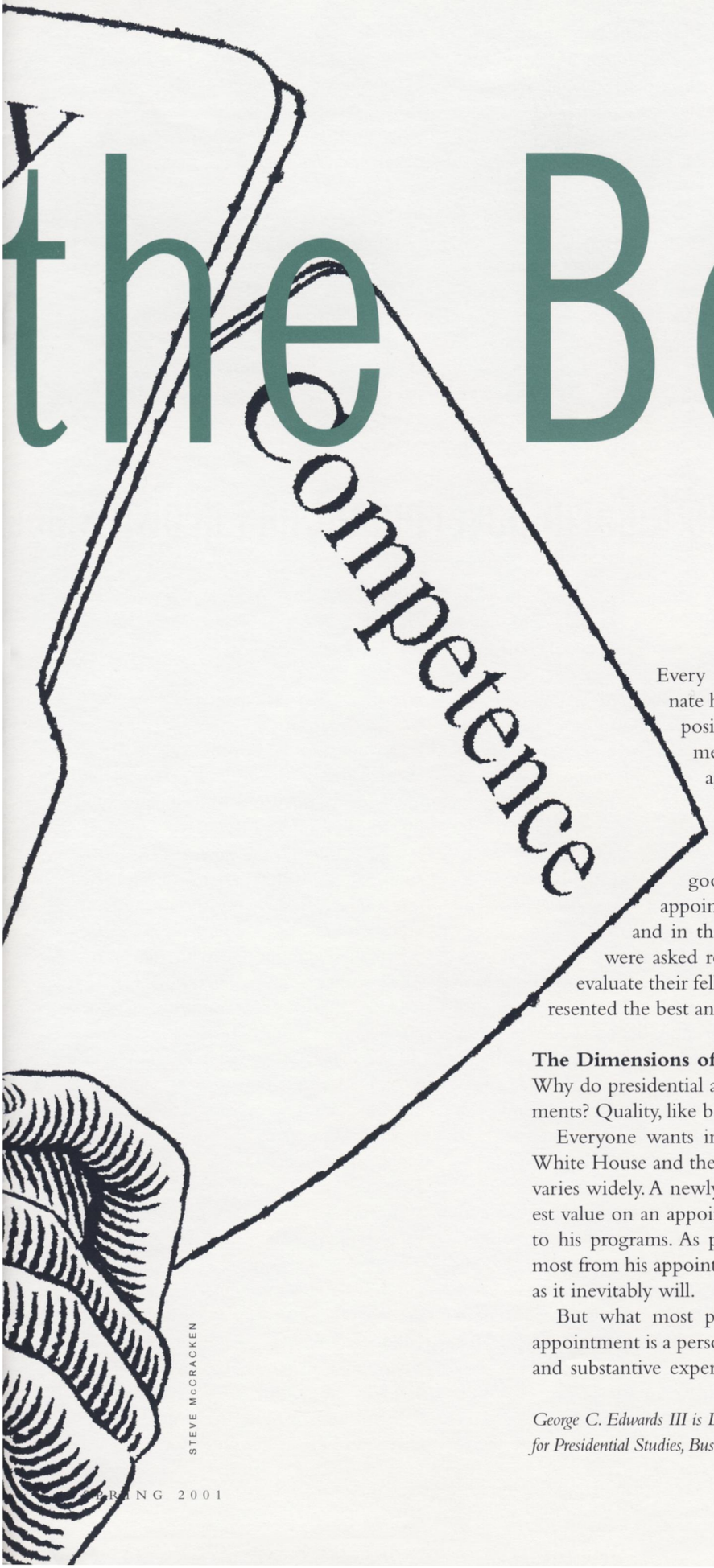
the Best?

by George C. Edwards III



STEVE McCRACKEN

Every new presidential administration promises to nominate highly talented, well-qualified people to fill appointed positions in the executive branch of the federal government. Yet every president makes more than a few appointments that do not satisfy the National Academy of Public Administration's call for "able, creative, and experienced people," who will serve as "the most important ingredient in the recipe for good government." Indeed, when 435 senior-level appointees in the second administration of Ronald Reagan and in the administrations of George Bush and Bill Clinton were asked recently by Paul C. Light and Virginia L. Thomas to evaluate their fellow appointees, only 11 percent agreed that they represented the best and brightest America has to offer.

The Dimensions of "Quality"

Why do presidential administrations so often fail to make quality appointments? Quality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Everyone wants integrity, of course. Beyond that, however, how the White House and the American public at large view quality appointments varies widely. A newly elected presidential administration places the highest value on an appointee's unwavering commitment to the president and to his programs. As presidential recruiters see it, what a president needs most from his appointees is loyalty—especially when the going gets rough, as it inevitably will.

But what most people mean when they discuss the quality of an appointment is a person's ability in a wide variety of areas. Intellectual skills and substantive expertise are essential. Political skills—prowess in dealing

George C. Edwards III is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and director of the Center for Presidential Studies, Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University.

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with the press, Capitol Hill, the courts, state and local officials, and interest groups—are also key. Requisite managerial skills are many and varied: planning, organizing, and motivating employees in a bureaucracy, creating open communication with subordinates and good working conditions for employees, and developing administrative strategies for accomplishing the president's goals. Strong interpersonal skills include personal stability, a sense of self-esteem, flexibility, a tolerance for conflict, the ability to accept criticism, and a sense of duty.

The tension between the White House's need for loyal and committed appointees and the country's requirement for men and women of exceptional ability to run the executive branch appears to require a trade-off between loyalty and competence. But is such a trade-off unavoidable?

Why Is Loyalty So Important?

As the size and scope of the federal government have grown since the 1960s, so has White House distrust of the government bureaucracy, especially among Republicans. Richard Nixon told his cabinet, "We can't depend on people who believe in another philosophy of government to give us their undivided loyalty or their best work." As a result, when presidents make their political appointments, they focus less on improving management of the bureaucracy and more on gaining control over it. As Mark Huddleston observes in *The Government's Managers*, "It is a rare political appointee...who does not take up his or her office convinced that senior career officials are...recalcitrant adversaries, saboteurs-in-waiting, obstinately committed to existing programs, and resistant to new policy initiatives."

These fears have at least a theoretical basis. The agendas of executive departments and independent agencies have been set by laws that predate the president's arrival in office—and that serve as a force for continuity rather than change.

For their own reasons (usually political), Congress and the White House have historically given great leeway to government agencies in implementing public policy, granting them significant influence over the rules, procedures, design, and substance of agency action.

As the federal government has grown since

The sheer complexity of policymaking, among other things, keeps the president and Congress from developing and defining all the requisite details of how to carry out policy. Most, sometimes all, details must be left to subordinates, usually in the executive branch.

Moreover, people attracted to work for government agencies are likely to support their policies, whether in the fields of social welfare, agriculture, or national defense. And all but a few high-level members of the civil service spend their careers within a single agency whose range of responsibilities is relatively narrow. Officials in the Education Department, for example, do not deal with the entire national budget; they deal only with the part that pertains to their programs. With each bureaucratic unit focusing on its own programs, few people in the unit view these programs from a wider, national perspective.

Outside influences also encourage parochialism among bureaucrats. Interest groups and congressional committees that support an agency expect bureaucratic support in return. Because these outsiders generally favor the policies the bureaucracy has been carrying out all along—and which they probably helped initiate—what they really want is to perpetuate the status quo.

The White House has gone to some lengths to constrain the exercise of bureaucratic discretion. It requires clearance of regulations and congressional testimony, limits agency budgets, and restricts procurement and other spending. Perhaps most important, it has tried to control personnel decisions more centrally and deepened the penetration of political appointees into departments and agencies. It has made ever more political appointments not only at the top of the executive bureaucracy, but also at lower ranks. Presidents have also tried to place political appointees in career positions just before leaving office, and presidents and their appointees have used the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 to reassign top-level civil servants.

Are Careerists Responsive to the President?

Is the bureaucracy as problematic as the White House believes? Certainly the ideologies of the White House and senior members of the civil service have clashed at times, although the potential for resistance to presidential initiatives has varied across agencies. Verifying that the policy predispositions of civil servants are critical to their compliance with the president's wishes is more difficult.

A few studies have found instances of bureaucratic sabotage. In his 1977 work, *A Government of Strangers*, Hugh Heclo concluded that sabotage was common, but he did not provide systematic evidence in support of this conclusion. In a more rigorous 1994 study, *Bureaucratic Dynamics*, B. Dan Wood and Richard Waterman found that the Environmental Protection Agency maintained and even increased its inspections and citations of violations of environmental regulations in the face of efforts by the Reagan administration to weaken the enforcement of environmental protection laws. Marissa Golden also found some resistance to Reagan initiatives in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department.

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Francis Rourke, however, argues that cases of bureaucratic challenge to presidential authority have been rare and that senior bureaucrats follow the election returns and defer to the president. "What is surprising," agrees James Q. Wilson in *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, "is not that bureaucrats sometimes can defy the president but that they support his programs as much as they do. The reason is simple:...bureaucrats want to do the right thing."

Many studies of federal bureaucracies—the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Office of Surface Mining and Reclamation, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Labor Relations Board, the Justice Department's Antitrust Division, the Interstate Commerce Commission—have consistently found that bureaucracies change the way they implement policy in line with the president's wishes, even in areas of political controversy.

Perhaps more important, argues James Pfiffner, despite their initial suspicion and hostility, political appointees themselves usually develop trust in the career executives who work for them. Indeed, according to surveys of appointees ranging from the administration of Lyndon Johnson to the present, political appointees—regardless of party, ideology, or administration—find career executives both competent and responsive. "In interview after interview," observes Paul Light, "presidential appointees celebrate the dedication of their bureaucrats."

In a 1984 survey, large majorities of political appointees in the administrations of Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan rated career executives both competent and responsive. A later survey by Judith Michaels found that George Bush's political appointees relied heavily on careerists for all aspects of their jobs, from formulating policy to implementing it. Bush appointees found career civil servants helpful in everything from mastering substantive policy details and anticipating policy implementation problems to liaison with Congress and other components of the bureaucracy. In another survey, by Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman, most of Bush's political appointees agreed that civil servants brought valuable experience to the job and had good leadership qualities and management skills. Not only did the appointees view senior civil servants as working hard to carry out administration policies, they saw them as more experienced and as better managers than themselves.

The most recent data, from the Brookings Presidential Appointee Initiative, confirms that more than four out of five appointees found the career officials with whom they worked to be both responsive and competent (table 1). Only 25 percent of appointees found directing career employees to be a difficult task. Indeed, every other task about which appointees were asked was more difficult. More than a third of appointees, for example, found it hard to deal successfully with the White House.

In sum, the bulk of the evidence is that federal bureaucrats are "principled agents." Whatever their preconceptions, political appointees usually develop trust in the career executives who work for them. There is in fact little need to make a tradeoff between ability and loyalty to "control" the civil service. The bureaucrats, it turns out, are not that hard to control.

Then why do new administrations persist in the expectation of facing bureaucratic resistance? The answer seems to be that most political appointees think that their experience with careerists is somehow unique—that their careerists are different. The belief in a recalcitrant bureaucracy is so deeply ingrained in the conventional wisdom about how government works that it perseveres in the face of widespread contradictory experience.

the 1960s, so has White House distrust of the bureaucracy.

Loyalty Is Not Enough

No matter how loyal appointees are to the president, they need to know what to do and how to do it once they get their jobs. The ability to manage, design, and effectively carry out new programs, implement key legislation, or deliver services should be prominent—indeed primary—criteria for choosing potential appointees.

Although there are no systematic data on how individual appointees

TABLE 1. How Reagan, Bush, and Clinton Administration Appointees View Career Civil Servants

APPOINTEES' ADMINISTRATION	PERCENTAGE OF APPOINTEES EXPRESSING VIEW: CAREERISTS ARE COMPETENT	CAREERISTS ARE RESPONSIVE
All	83%	81%
Reagan administration	86	87
Bush administration	85	83
Clinton administration	82	78

Source: Paul C. Light and Virginia L. Thomas, *The Merit and Reputation of an Administration: Presidential Appointees on the Appointments Process* (Presidential Appointee Initiative, 2000), pp. 9, 31, 32.

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affect the performance of the federal executive branch, there is no shortage of commentary on it. Several years ago David Cohen, a former career senior executive, forcefully argued in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* that no matter what the selection criteria, political appointees themselves are often not responsive to the White House because they come with personal agendas, have multiple loyalties, and are layered upon each other. Patricia Ingraham adds that links between the White House and political appointees are frequently unclear and tenuous, providing everyone more discretion.

No president is going to appoint political opponents to positions in the executive branch. The issue is not either-or but rather one of relative emphasis. Quality matters.

Even where appointees are responsive to presidential agendas, Cohen says, they tend to lack the managerial skills to enact those agendas successfully. Most appointees are lawyers, legislators, congressional staffers, academics, lobbyists, presidential campaign workers, and trusted aides to senior appointees. Some may have substantial policy expertise, but almost all are essentially individual entrepreneurs, not team players. They have little managerial experience. Many are quite young.

Thus, Cohen maintains, when it comes to selecting the top leadership of the executive branch, the White House largely abandons professional standards. The professional standards it does observe are limited to technical and program expertise. The abilities to manage, design, and effectively carry out new programs, implement key legislation, or deliver services are not prominent criteria for evaluating potential appointees. Would any large corporation, Cohen asks, place at the head of a major operating division a person with no experience managing funds or supervising people? What enterprise would fill every senior management position with people with little or no inside experience? Who would accept the "mindless notion that any bright and public-spirited dilettante can run a government agency"?

In an 1987 article entitled "When Worlds Collide," Paul Light found that preparation for a presidentially appointed job, whether defined in terms of management experience, negotiating skills, congressional relations, or personal style, makes a difference. Most important, appointees' preparation for office directly affects their ability to use the career service to an administration's advantage. The better they were prepared for office, the more they saw the careerists with whom they worked as responsive and competent. In short, good preparation for their jobs helps political appointees mobilize the resources of the career bureaucracy. Appointees who knew what they wanted—and how to get it—viewed the career service as the most helpful in all areas, including management, substantive policy, technical analysis, and congressional relations. Thus, concludes Light, "skills are the crucial link between appointees and careerists."

Laurence Lynn is one of the few analysts to focus on how the quality of appointees affects policy implementation. In a 1985 study of the administration of Ronald Reagan, Lynn examined five agencies, looking for lasting changes each may have made in its core activity consistent with Reagan's policy preferences. He found that appointees' success in changing the behavior of an agency was related not to their loyalty to the president and commitment to his policies, but to four specific factors. One was the opportunities within the agency environment to accomplish change. The others were managerial skills and experience, the appointee's personality, and the appointee's design for achieving his or her goals. Although the environment of an agency is outside a president's control, appointing skilled and experienced managers with appropriate personalities and designs for achieving goals is not. Presidents should take full advantage of that opportunity.

Bring Out the Best

Although the conventional wisdom urges the president-elect to stress personal loyalty and commitment to his program in evaluating candidates for positions in the bureaucracy, the best evidence is that bureaucratic resistance to change does not pose a substantial obstacle to the president's achieving his goals.

No president is going to appoint political opponents to positions in the executive branch. The issue is not either-or but rather one of relative emphasis. Quality matters. The greater the administrative challenge, and thus the more sophisticated the design needed to exploit it, the greater the premium on analytical ability, managerial and political skills, and personality—on those skills that bring out the best in the bureaucracy. ■

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